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News

Clemson study warns of urban sprawl

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A Clemson study suggests Greenville could become the next Atlanta in terms of urban growth, traffic and developed land percentages, officials said Wednesday.

The prediction comes from a study on projections for Upstate South Carolina by Clemson, Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium and Upstate Forever.

Released Feb. 12, the study predicted a 200 percent increase in the amount of developed land in eight Upstate counties -- including Greenwood -- by 2030.

"Basically it shows what the Upstate will look like in 2030 if we keep developing land like we have been," Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said Wednesday.

In 2000, there were 576,000 acres of developed land in the eight counties. Under the prediction, that number will climb to 1.5 million acres by 2030.

"That's a future a lot like Atlanta," Wyche said.

The project began by looking at land use within the Saluda-Reedy Watershed, said Jeffery Allen, director of Clemson's South Carolina Water Resources Center.

"We essentially did three separate growth models for the coast and decided we would try to do that same sort of model for the Upstate," he said.

Researchers began by analyzing changes in population and developed land from 1990 to 2000.

"We looked at how much land had been developed during that period and compared it to how the population grew," Allen said. "We ended up taking the average rate of change from all eight counties and we came up with a 15 percent population increase and an 80 percent increase in land development."

That 5-to-1 ratio, combined with the consultation of county planners, was used to create a growth model. With satellite imagery, the group defined current development and potential future development through a series of maps, giving the growth a visual component.

"The way the Upstate has been growing is classic sprawl -- mainly spread out, low-density development connected by roads," Allen said. "It's important to understand that this pattern of development has serious consequences both on the environment and on taxpayers."

"In sprawling regions, there is more polluted runoff, more air pollution from more driving and more loss of valuable lands and resources. It is a lot more expensive to provide services, such as schools, roads, water and sewer and police and fire protection, to a widely dispersed population."

A 2005 study by Clemson's Department of Planning and Architecture calculated the average population to urban growth ratio at 0.5 from 1940 to 1990, making the current trend five times more developed land per person than in the past, Allen said.

"What we've found is that we tend to really overbuild per person. We're developing much more than we were 50 years ago," he said.

Central to the study released Tuesday is a component that shows urban growth based on different population ratios, comparing the 5:1 prediction to the amount of developed land as a 4:1, 3:1 and 2:1 scale.

"In every one of these, it's the same number of people, the same number of businesses, you're just not taking up as much land," Allen said.

The group proposes growth management strategies like revitalizing existing areas, filling in open land within an already developed area, transfer of development rights and urban service boundaries.

The group plans to present the study to planning commissions and county councils across the Upstate over the next few months, Wyche said, showing different alternatives and possible risks if the growth is allowed to continue unchecked.

"When you look at the difference in these two growth scenarios, the initial cost of providing services to that big as area is enormous," Allen said. "People just aren't thinking about that, I think because this kind of growth is so incremental, it happens one lot, one subdivision at a time. Before you know it, it's upon you. We see what's happening in Atlanta: They're out of water.

"That's going to be our future if we don't change our practices now. You have to have growth, but you have to do it in a way where you don't destroy yourself."

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